

Fort Taylor
Southwest Shore near
Whitehead Spit
Key West
Monroe County
Florida

HABS No. FL-283

HABS,
FLA,
44-KEY,
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HABS, FLA, 44-KEY, 2-
DUE TO INSUFFICIENT DOCUMENTATION AT THE
TIME OF RECORDING, THIS MATERIAL DOES NOT
CONFORM TO CURRENT HABS STANDARDS.

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. FLA-283

FORT TAYLOR

Location: Near Whitehead Spit on the southwest shore of the
Island about one mile from the center of the city.

USGS Key West Quarangle, Universal Transverse
Mercator Coordinates: 17.417930.2714920.

Present Owner United States Navy.
and Occupant:

Significance: A mid-nineteenth century fortification built of brick
and local stone, the remains of which provide an
excellent example of military construction of the
period.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

Early in 1845, 62 and 89/100 acres were purchased from Key West
landholders by the United States Government to serve as a site of
a fort for the defense of Key West. By November of that year
construction of temporary buildings and a wharf of yellow pine
was begun. The fort was constructed over the next two decades,
interrupted by epidemics of yellow fever which caused periodic
withdrawals of personnel and hurricanes which brought death and
destruction.

On October 11, 1846, a hurricane destroyed all the public works
constructed up to that time except the cistern, smithy, and
stable, and caused the death of four workmen, who were drowned.
The work on the fort, however, continued. Despite another
violent storm on August 21, 22, and 23, 1850, by the end of
September of that year the wall had been raised nine feet above
the high water level. Lack of appropriations temporarily
suspended work in 1851, and a hurricane on August 27, 1856, again
damaged the fortification.

By 1861, however, the main fort seems to have been close to
completion. It was first occupied at that time and continued to
be garrisoned throughout the Civil War.

The site of the fort was originally in 10' of water at high tide
approximately 440 yards from shore. It commanded the three
channels of the Key West Harbor; Ship Channel, Southwest Channel,
and Northwest Channel. The fort as constructed was trapezoidal
in shape with an interior parade ground and polygonal bastions at

each corner. The long side of the trapezoid faced the island. The roof on the barracks building forming the landward side was gable. The roof on the other three sides was flat allowing for gun emplacements. The submarine foundation was of granite and local coral rock bonded in concrete. The walls were brick and the building was three tiers in height. A wooden drawbridge 720' long connected the fort to the mainland.

At the beginning of the Civil War as the Fort was nearing completion, negotiations were undertaken to obtain land for two advanced or so-called "Martello" towers. The sites of the towers were located a mile and one-half and three miles respectively from the Fort on the southern shore of Key West. The towers were constructed of brick, circular in form with tier of casements. They were connected to Fort Taylor by a railroad. On November 22, 1866, orders were received to suspend all work on masonry or casemated fronts exposed to direct fire from the sea, current advances proving them obsolete. Work was stopped on the towers short of completion. Both towers are currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places as East and West Martello Towers. The towers were not included in this survey.

On October 22, 1865 another violent hurricane damaged both fort and towers. Hurricanes in 1875 and 1876 washed away part of the sea walls and thousands of cubic yards of sand filling from the cover face and batteries, destroyed bridges, road crossings, and fences, and damaged temporary buildings.

Reports in 1879 described the Fort as in a deteriorated condition. Embrasure shutters were rusted and loose, bricks needed repointing, cisterns leaked, the wood bridge from shore was unsafe, and the quarters needed repairs to roof, timbers and gutters. In 1898 the top two tiers of the fort were removed and a section of the barracks building (landside) removed to provide a large access area. Sometime between 1891 and 1939 the Fort became landlocked.

The Fort continued in Army ownership until 1947 when it was transferred to the Navy. At the time of the survey it was used as a storage yard for scrap metal. It is at present (1979) being restored as a museum and historic property under the auspices of the State of Florida.

B. Sources of Information:

1. Original architectural drawings: Plans and sections of Fort Taylor, Key West; Fort Taylor Advanced Towers, Key West Island, Plans, Sections, Elevations and Details of Towers No. 1 and No. 2. Record Group 77, Records of the Chief of Engineers, Fortifications File, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.
2. Old views: Print, Harper's Weekly, circa 1864. Photograph, Key West, with Fort Taylor in background taken from lighthouse on Whitehead Street circa 1895 and aerial view of Fort Taylor, 1959, official U.S. Navy photographs Key West, Florida.
3. Bibliography:
 - a. Primary and unpublished sources:

"Description of Key West," Reservation File, Office of the Adjutant General, Record Group 94, National Archives and Record Service, Washington, D.C.

"History of Fort Taylor, Key West, Florida." Compiled from Official Records by Mr. George Phillips, Fortkeeper, October, 1879", Fortification Division, Record Group 77, National Archives and Record Service, Washington, D.C.
 - b. Interviews:

Ida Barron, Key West Art and Historical Society, by telephone, October, 1979.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The Fort is now a one-story brick-walled trapezoid with a central parade ground and polygonal bastions at each corner. The long side (north elevation) is formed by a building which originally served as barracks. A central sally port has a segmental arch and forms the main entrance. The sally port is flanked on the parade ground side by rows of windows with projecting stone lintels and sills. The roof is gable. The section of the barracks building connecting it to the southeast bastion is missing.

The other three sides contain casemates on the parade ground sides entered by a series of segmentally arched openings. The roofs are flat and the remaining wall from the original upper stories forms a parapet which is pierced for gun emplacements.

Some of the early machinery remains, including a desalination plant with a brass plaque identifying it as "Dr. Normandy's Patent Marine Aerated Fresh Water Apparatus, London, No. 189," the mechanism for operating the draw bridge; traverse irons for gun carriages; and some of the cannons.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared in 1967 during a summer project jointly sponsored by the Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc. of Key West, and the Historic American Buildings Survey. Twenty-two structures were recorded, ranging from commercial structures, residences and hospitals to a convent, a lighthouse, and the Memorial to the Victims of the Disaster of the U.S. Battleship Maine.

The project was under the direction of F. Blair Reeves, AIA, Associate Professor, Department of Architecture, University of Florida. Measured drawings were prepared by student architects John D. Davenport and John F. Grimm of Texas A. and M. University, and John O. Crosby of the University of Florida. Mrs. Betty M. Bruce of the Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc., and Professor Reeves were responsible for the historical and architectural data. They were assisted by members of the Foundation. Ida W. Barron, an employee of the United States Navy, supplied the photographs.